DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 470 EA 026 166

AUTHOR Vuic, Jason C.
TITLE Early Childhood Education: Increasing the Role of Local School Boards.
INSTITUTION National School Boards Association, Alexandria, VA.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Updating School Board Policies; v25 n3 p1-5 1994

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Board of Education Policy; *Board of Education Role; *Boards of Education; *Early Childhood Education; Elementary Secondary Education; Immigrants; *Kindergarten; Limited English Speaking; Strategic Planning

ABSTRACT

Throughout the last decade, momentum has been building for the development of early education programs that can provide tremendous advantages for all children. This article pertains to the school board's role in early childhood education. It outlines steps to help school boards develop early childhood education programs at the local level. It describes the board's role in community-school planning, developmentally appropriate education, parental involvement and support, collaboration to provide comprehensive and integrated services, school staff, assessment, and prevention. (LMI)

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Updating School Board Policies

A component of the National Education Policy Network of the National School Boards Association provided to NSBA National Affiliates and NEPN subscribers

Volume 25/Number 3
1994

# Early Childhood Education: Increasing the Role of Local School Boards

*by Jason C. Vuic*

ED 375 470

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# Early Childhood Education: Increasing the Role of Local School Boards

***by Jason C. Vuic***

*'Tis education forms the common mind*
*Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined.*
— Alexander Pope

This well-known passage underlies one of the most important concepts in modern educational philosophy: early childhood education.

Throughout the last decade, momentum has been building for the development of early education programs that can provide tremendous advantages for all children. A strong and growing body of evidence indicates that successful programs during the pre-school and early school years lead to higher levels of success in later life, as well as providing deterrents to many of the problems facing today's schools — high absenteeism and drop-out rates, violent behavior, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse and the unemployability of students.

## Why Should School Districts Take on Early Childhood Programs?

The inherent rationale for responsive, high-quality early education programs is that they will enable schools to educate students who are at risk of failing, both in the classroom and in life. A good early childhood education program gives children enthusiasm for learning, a greater responsiveness to teachers, and the positive attitudes toward schooling that may carry over to later grades.

Children are more likely to succeed if their first encounter with school takes place in a pressure free environment, where the focus rests primarily on physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development (SREB, *Readiness For School: The Early Childhood Challenge*, 1992). It is this sort of atmosphere that can also foster the increased parental involvement that may be critical to a child's academic success and a partnership between home and school that tends to last as the student grows older.

Early childhood programs can also produce long term benefits for employers and communities. Business people continue to tell educators that many students lack the necessary skills for employment in today's job market, leading to expanded expenditures for training and or welfare services in support of an unprepared workforce.

Research reveals that when an effective pre-school program is provided for at-risk children, the damaging effects of poverty diminish and, eventually, are replaced by lower levels of grade retention, special education referrals, pregnancy, crime and social services (John R. Burrueta-Clement, Lawrence J. Schweinhart, et al., *Changed Lives: The Effects of the Perry Preschool Program on Youths Through Age 19*, 1984). As a long-term solution, early childhood education can be both cost-effective and morally expedient for society as a whole.

In addition to cost-effectiveness, the broadening of child care opportunities will increase community support for public education. According to the U.S. Department of Education's *National Household Education Survey* (1993), the number of hours children spend in early childhood education programs is directly related to the employment status of their mothers.

As nearly 60 percent of American mothers with children ages three to five work outside the home, current pre-kindergarten programs lasting only a half day are woefully inadequate and fail to meet the needs of children (*Current Population Reports*, series PD20-469). If early education programs are expanded, hardships currently presented by relative and non-relative home-based care will be alleviated, as most parents would welcome full-day child care with the benefits of a high-quality educational program.

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***Jason C. Vuic is a recent graduate of Wake Forest University, and a policy intern for the National Education Policy Network.***

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There is a great deal to be gained from early childhood education programs, not the least of which is increased support for public education from parents and community members who see results. But starting an effective program requires a considerable amount of energy from all those involved, particularly school board members. The following steps, taken from NSBA's publication *Ready to Learn: Early Childhood Education and the Public Schools* (1991), provide a brief outline for what school boards need to do at the local level to create and maintain workable early childhood education programs.

The actions identified in the next few sections will not apply in every situation. They are, however, suggestions to help school boards get started in the process of developing their own pre-kindergarten programs. Each local school district will want to adapt and develop situation-appropriate strategies as the process unfolds.

## The School Board's Role at the Community Level

An important role for today's school board is to build bridges between the schools and those community groups that have an interest in providing for children and families. Through the establishment of community-wide planning councils, school boards should:

- Specify the array of services that young children and their families should receive and assess the community with respect to provision of these services, that is, conduct a thorough needs assessment.

  Along with the benefits we gain from the diversity of our unique American society come a variety of attitudes, values and beliefs. Each school board will have to determine what its community wants and needs from its education programs and what the school community can do to meet those needs. The success of any program, including early childhood education, will be affected by its relevance to issues of importance in the community and its sensitivity to the opinions and cultural/linguistic backgrounds of its citizens.

- Establish priorities in the needs that are not being met effectively. Discuss who can do what, identifying community resources and additional funding sources. Even school systems lacking the funds to offer a full range of pre-school education/child care can serve as a referral agency for groups that do. Community advice and involvement are integral to the district's ability to respond to the demands placed upon it to serve the whole child. The sharing of ideas and coordination of resources increase the potential for developing effective programs and, simultaneously, enhance the visibility and viability of those groups represented on the planning committee, thereby making them more effective in their own arenas.

  Perhaps the most important contribution that the school district can make, in addition to the academic program, is provision of a healthy learning environment. The school as a healthy and safe place for students and staff means more than a well-maintained building. That is important, of course, not only for physical health and safety but for the subliminal message sent by a clean and well-kept facility: We care about you and your surroundings.

  Beyond the building site, a healthy school is one that is emotionally and psychologically healthy, a place in which everyone can be accepted as a good person, where positive behaviors are rewarded and negative behaviors are fairly punished, where people like each other and like what they are doing. An emotionally and physically healthy school staff that feels good about itself will be reflected in students who also feel good and in improved performance on everyone's part.

- Develop a coordinated action plan. Integrating all the education and service elements of an early childhood program should be the function of a central person with good organizational and leadership skills. A coordinator should have sufficient time and knowledge to carry out all the tasks required to develop and implement an effective, comprehensive program. These responsibilities include:

  — supervising all aspects of the early childhood education program;

  — coordinating development/selection of curriculum;

  — providing for inservice training for school staff;

  — coordinating the education program with community agencies' services;

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*Updating School Boards Policies* is published six times annually and provided to every Board member and the policy/administrator of school districts that participate in the National School Boards Association's National Affiliate Program or subscribe to NSBA's National Education Policy Network. NEPN Staff: Michael E. Eader, Associate Executive Director; Adria L. Thomas, Director, Research and Management Services; Karen Powe, Editor; Dottie Gray, Clearinghouse Manager. Editorial Board: Susan Butler, Sally Zakariya, Lynne Glassman.

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— organizing meetings to share program information with parents and other community members and to seek their involvement;

— writing grant proposals for supporting funding; and

— developing and maintaining an ongoing evaluation plan.

- Communicate the need for staying power. Because the first results could take 16-18 years, it is important to assume a long-term commitment. While individual members may change, the advisory/planning group should have a permanent function, one that goes beyond the initial organizing and implementation of an early childhood education program. Revising and maintaining the program to meet the students' and community's changing needs will be an ongoing responsibility.

If, having worked through this process, the school board decides to provide a pre-kindergarten program (or in the event a program has been mandated), then it should proceed to the next phase — development and implementation.

## Developmentally Appropriate Education

School boards should take the following steps with respect to ensuring developmentally appropriate education for prekindergarten children.

- Develop a statement of philosophy, objectives, and principles for early childhood programs to provide an overall framework for specific policies in curriculum, materials, staffing and staff development, assessment, and teacher evaluation. This step is perhaps the most decisive element in the development and achievement of any education program — the school board's supporting goals and policies.

- Review the need for additional resources required to support developmentally appropriate early childhood education, e.g., more money for teacher salaries because of fewer children per teacher. Some questions you may want to ask are:

  — Are there qualified early childhood educators currently on the district staff? How many teachers and/or other staff members will need training? Who can provide the inservice training?

  — What programs or activities, both in school and community-wide, are currently in place that will support the early childhood program?

  — What local and state technical assistance support and resources are available? What funds are available, locally and from state and federal sources? From private sources? Who can develop funding proposals if they are needed?

  — What can we do now? What can we do later? What are some alternatives for providing education programs and services that the school district cannot afford?

  — Have we considered curriculum content and instruction for students with special needs, including English-as-a-Second-Language and handicapped students?

  — What can the school district do to assist other organizations that provide services and education, reinforcing the need for cooperation and consistent messages from all parts of the community?

- Re-evaluate the K-3 program for developmental appropriateness and continuity, and coordinate pre-kindergarten and kindergarten instructional programs.

  It may be advisable to make some changes so that there is a gradual transition in instructional methods. Transition activities are more likely to be found in schools with established prekindergarten programs, a high level of poverty among families served, and a high degree of administrative and board support (refer to Mary E. Logue and John M. Love, "Making the Transition to Kindergarten," *Principal*, May 1992, pp. 10-12.)

- Assign leadership responsibility for the early childhood program to an administrator with training in child development and early childhood curriculum and teaching. Provide authority for this leader to implement district policy and support implementation efforts of teachers, principles, and parents.

- Encourage each school to educate parents on developmentally appropriate practice and on the school's philosophy on early childhood education.

## Parental Involvement and Family Education/Support

To build a strong component of parent involvement and family education/support, school boards should:

- Encourage the development of parent education programs, support groups, and other activities to enhance parenting skills, enjoyment of parenting, and involvement in children's education.

- Include parents in the community-wide planning council, school committees and other forums that elicit their input and contribute to self-confidence and empowerment.

- Inform parents as to the availability and quality of community programs.

- Cooperate with other groups in making routine home visits to build

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closer links with families and to foster a commitment to their children's education. Forming an alliance with health and social service agencies can establish workable systems for sharing information about children and families in need of help.

- Develop long-term monitoring techniques to assess the effect of family programs on drop-out rates, attendance, retention, student self-esteem, and other important outcomes.

## Collaboration to Provide Comprehensive and Integrated Services

To promote the provision of comprehensive and integrated services to young children and their families, school boards need to collaborate with others in the community in the following ways:

- Participate actively in community coordinating bodies along with other agencies providing support services to children and families; if there is no such group, take the initiative in forming one.
- Work with the existing early childhood programs in the community when planning new public school initiatives. Take care not to take any action that undermines other community early childhood programs.
- If assessment of community needs indicates a need for full-day child care, work with other key agencies to set up before- and after-school child care in the schools.
- Encourage funding for local child care resource and referral agencies, while collaborating with them to increase effectiveness.
- Encourage innovative family support services with linkages to the public schools (eg., coordinated case management, follow-up).
- Develop coordination and referral procedures with local health and social service agencies to increase knowledge and access to services.
- Offer to have schools as the focal point for health and social services.
- Participate in federal and state food programs and in efforts to expand the availability of these services.
- Provide time for school staff to work with relevant service agency personnel and families.

### Integrated Services in Lee County, FL

The Preschool Interagency Coordinating Council of Ft. Myers, Florida is an innovative combination of the Preschool Consortium (serving primarily handicapped children) and the Interagency Council on Early Childhood Services (concerned mostly with at-risk youth). The council is designed to maximize the effectiveness of community resources on behalf of at-risk preschool children and their families. The council plans, coordinates, implements and evaluates specialized services for preschool children, while informing members of the community about the available services. The program is located in Lee County schools, health clinics, public housing developments, human resource facilities, private health provider offices, clients' homes, and local agencies serving pre-school age children. Sponsors include the School Board of Lee County, service providers, social service agencies, parents, and early childhood specialists. For more information contact:

School Board of Lee County
2055 Central Ave.
Ft. Myers, FL 33901
813-337-8503

## Paying Attention to the School Staff

Numerous issues concerning teachers and other staff members require board attention. School boards will want to consider:

- Supporting the improvement and expansion of early childhood preservice training at colleges and universities, and encourage the hiring of teachers with early childhood preservice and credentials. Curriculum should include coursework on child development, as well as a supervised teaching practicum with 3-5 year olds.
- Supporting a national accreditation standard for preschool and child programs, so as to have more consistent licensing criteria from state to state.
- Providing ongoing inservice training for teachers, administrators, and others who work with prekindergarten children. As part of the training program, teachers can benefit from observing good early childhood programs and from a mentor approach in which they get feedback from an experienced educator.
- Facilitating recruitment to the field of early childhood education (e.g., future teacher programs, credit for involvement).
- Setting a standard for maximum class size and staff/child ratio in all programs.
- Establishing joint staff development sessions with members from other programs within the community.
- Encouraging participation of prekindergarten program staff in transition activities such as workshops, while fostering communication between kindergarten and pre-kindergarten teachers about students and curriculum.

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## Assessment

Determining how effective the district's early childhood education program is will be a factor of the program goals established by the school board early in the planning. What will be measured in terms of knowledge gains and behavior changes will depend on what the board and advisory committee have identified as the desired, achievable results of the program.

School boards will want to assess their programs to see if they are really working and to learn what changes are required to meet ongoing and/or unanticipated needs. In this time of increased attention to accountability, no program can be sustained without a review of its impact.

Regular evaluation includes looking at whether materials used are interesting and relevant to students and teachers, how parents and the school community are reacting to the program, and how well it seems to be meeting its objectives. In early childhood education programs, it is particularly important to explore innovative developmentally-oriented means of assessing young children's progress.

Your board may want to discourage use of standardized tests for screening, tracking or promotion of preschool students, particularly as the sole measure of assessment, and encourage use of multiple assessment measures, including teacher and parent observation.

## At the end of the day

Early education can provide a means for anticipating and addressing learning and behavioral issues in a preventive way. Prevention is always more effective and requires fewer resources and less effort, in the long run, than later intervention and treatment.

Preschool programs allow long-range effects to take place. They provide the structure for dealing with specific learning, health or behavior problems as they arise. They set the framework within which attention can be focused on those issues deemed critical and on many lifelong attitudes and behaviors that can be affected at young ages.

Early childhood education programs deal with the whole child (the intellectual, social, physical and emotional beings), provide knowledge and skills young students need to achieve academic success and enhance young children's opportunities for happy, productive lives. ■

## Publications on Early Childhood Education

*Early Childhood Education: Information on Costs and Services at High-Quality Centers*, U.S. General Accounting Office, 1989.

*Policy Perspectives: Excellence in Early Childhood Education*, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1990.

*Ready to Learn: A Mandate for the Nation*, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1991.

*Right From the Start: The Report of the NASBE Task Force on Early Childhood Education*, National Association of State Boards of Education, 1988.

## Organizations That Can Help

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education (ERIC/EECE)
University of Illinois
805 West Pennsylvania Avenue
Urbana, IL 61801

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
1834 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20009
(800) 424-2460

High/Scope Educational Research Foundation
600 North River Street
Ypsilanti, MI 48198-2898
(313) 485-2000

National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI)
1463 Rhode Island Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20005
(202) 387-1281



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